

FILE ONLYUNITED PRESS INTERNATIONAL
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WASHINGTON

A thorough check of U.S. intelligence agencies was the basis for a flat White House denial of reports that a high-level Soviet spy had defected to the United States, a senior administration official said today.

Deepening the mystery of the spy who may never have been, the official said a check of "the entire system of intelligence agencies" found "that there was no one that could indicate to us that any country anywhere did have a KGB defector."

His comments shed light on a rare public statement issued Tuesday by national security adviser John Poindexter amid conflicting reports from Congress and extraordinary administration efforts to brand the defector story as untrue.

Poindexter issued the terse, two-sentence statement in response to fallout from weekend news reports that the CIA, in a major intelligence coup, helped a high-ranking KGB officer defect to the United States last year.

The furor was kept alive Tuesday by Sen. Chic Hecht, R-Nev., who told The Washington Times the defector story was true, and a senior White House official -- later identified as Poindexter -- whose comments to reporters fueled suspicions there were loopholes in the administration's formal denials.

The concern was that Poindexter, in what one source described as "almost a light-hearted remark," had left open the possibility that the such a defection had taken place -- if not to the United States, then to a Western ally.

"There continues to be considerable speculation in the press concerning a Soviet defector," Poindexter said. "To the best of the knowledge of the United States government, there is no such defector either here or in any other country."

The statement failed to resolve questions about the origins of reports in U.S. News & World Report and The New York Times or why the administration went to such unusual lengths to rebut them. It came one day after White House spokesman Larry Speakes, deviating from his standard practice of not commenting on intelligence matters, delivered a flat denial of the defector story.

"That story is not correct," Speakes told reporters. Asked what aspect of the story was wrong, he replied, "The whole thing."

However, the reports continued to cause a behind-the-scenes stir within the administration and in national security circles elsewhere around Washington, despite statements from the White House and Capitol Hill that no such defector existed.

Even the CIA, which keeps such information under wraps, spread word to reporters that the stories were baseless.

U.S. News reported the CIA whisked a middle-aged spy out of East Germany by helicopter in late April or early May and that the defector was hidden to prevent leaks that might have upstaged the Geneva summit in November.

After the summit, he was flown to the United States and settled somewhere in the Midwest, the magazine said.

A congressional source told The Times the defector was "better than Yurchenko," the defector-redefector who embarrassed the CIA last year. "I don't know his rank," the source said, "but he was a high guy in the KGB."

The Washington Times, drawing on Turkish press reports, identified the alleged defector as a "Lt. Gen. Grishin" of GRU, the Soviet military intelligence agency.